City of Savannah Municipal Archives
Proud Savannah History Project
Interview: Mark Kreuger
Interviewed by Carla Johnson, August 10, 2021, Zoom
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Transcription edited by Megan Kerkhoff

Note: All interviews are unedited and may contain language and content that some may find offensive or difficult to view. Interviews reflect the time period they were recorded and the views of the interviewee.

Start of interview.

CJ: Good morning. Today is August 10th. It is 10:30 in the morning of 2021. I'm Carla Johnson, and I'm representing the City of Savannah's Municipal Archives as a volunteer. I'm interviewing Mark Krueger for the Savannah LGBTQ+ Oral History Project. We're conducting this interview on Zoom at, in our homes. Thank you so much for joining us today. So, Mark, let's start by telling us a little bit about yourself.

Mark Krueger: Well, I hate to be a contrarian, but it isn't so much about me, my story; it's more the story of the building of Savannah's gay community. It didn't exist at one point, and some of the struggles that some people had to go through—some of the horrible struggles that some people had to go through to build a gay community. So, I'd like to tell something that happened not too long ago to give you an idea of why these stories are important.

I've had a number of anti-gay incidents happen at my home. The last time a police officer came regarding the anti-gay incidents, she said to me—and this is a quote—"your house is known as a gay house, and we're not going to do anything to help you." And then she laughed and drove off. That was one of the most depressing days of my life, and I thought "should I stay in this fucking city or even in this whole fucking state?" I knew that there were a lot of people who had anti-gay sentiments, private citizens, and I got the indication that the police were not very friendly to the gay community, but for her to say that, it just brought it all home. So that's why I want to tell my story.

But I will begin in Milwaukee where I was born and raised. I got my first real job as a landscaper out of high school. I worked for the fellow for seven years, and he taught me a lot. We did good quality work. He also told me that he would never hire a black person because they were lazy; they were criminals they were crooks, you didn't want to hire one, you didn't want to live near one, you didn't want to go to school with one. He made most of his money from bribery, blackmail, and bid breaking. And yet when a black person came in to fill out a job application, and he had to allow that—that was the law. When they left, he would tell me to put into the

special file, which meant the garbage can; he wouldn't even look at them. That's sort of a different issue.

But anyway, one day when a police officer showed up—a high-ranking police officer—I thought, well, they've come to arrest my boss for all this crooked stuff he's been doing. But that wasn't the case. The officer was there to collect his bribe, or as my boss said, his special protection money. And he came back on a regular basis to collect his, his money. So, we learned a lot about the police department back then and that was in Milwaukee.

And then from age 23 to 25 in Milwaukee, I lived with a police sergeant. A closeted gay man. He was built like a football player; he had a crew cut, very conservative looking. And he taught me that the police in Milwaukee could get away with mistreating two groups of people: black men and gay men. And they could get away with it, and they did get away with it. And he'd tell me stories of things that they would do to gay men and black men. It was just embarrassing. And in the beginning, I would say "How can they get away with that" and he'd say "Well, we are the police. Who is going to stop us?" So that's my beginning history with police in Milwaukee.

When I moved to Savannah in 1980—and I moved here because I wanted to explore the world and Savannah was a true southern city, so it was an exciting place to explore the architecture of the city, etc., the southern history. I didn't have much interaction with the police. There was one dumpy, dirty gay bar in Savannah owned by a retired police officer who put no money into the bar. He lived a luxurious lifestyle, but the bar was a dump. There are a lot of bathrooms you go into you don't want to sit down, but this one you didn't even want to stand up. The urinal was so dirty, the whole place was dirty. And I did notice that there were only a couple of black people there, might be 100-200 white people and just a couple of black people. And I was told by my gay white acquaintances that it's because blacks didn't want to associate with whites; they had their own things to do. So, I kind of accepted that stupidly.

When Club One opened up, it was a private club; you had to be a member. I walked up to the door, showed my id, gave him a couple of dollars, and within a minute or two, I was a member in the door. I did have some black acquaintances; they told me that if you were black, you'd had to come back at four in the morning with four or five pieces of identification and a whole bunch of money to become a member. And amazingly some, some people did, so you would see some black people in Club One. I knew it was wrong.

CJ: Mark, I'm sorry to interrupt you. You know, it's clear to me that you were inspired to really be the, be the force behind this project. And what I'm hearing your themes are very much concerned with the, the—I'm going to have to stop the recording for one moment please.

MK: Okey-dokey.

[Interview paused]

CJ: I'm sorry, there was some background noise. What I'm hearing: there are a lot of themes about injustice, about your concerns about the police department, and a lot of concerns about the racial history both in Milwaukee as well as in Savannah. I, I'd like to kind of kind of bring us back though to Milwaukee; you said that you, you left in your twenties to move to Savannah.

MK: 25.

CJ: Can you tell us a little about your life in Milwaukee and, and your, your family?

MK: It was probably typical of gay men almost everywhere in America growing up. I knew that homosexuals existed, but I truly believe they only existed in Greenwich Village and San Francisco. I thought I was the only homosexual in the entire rest of the country. There was so little lack of information. So, I dated girls; I began having sex with girls at age fifteen. I had five relationships, girlfriends that I had sex with. And I enjoyed the sex, but I knew I would never fall in love with them. I knew I wasn't in love with them, and I knew if I had had my choice, I would have dated Paul instead of Pauline. But back then, you were afraid of being beaten up, ostracized, not hired, kicked up by your family. So, I hid all of that.

I went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and they sent everybody a student newspaper. It wasn't an official student newspaper, but—and I'm sitting in my aunt's living room (I lived with my aunt at the time, elderly aunt). I opened up the paper and there was an ad; it said this is a gay bar. And I turned bright red. I thought, in my college town 80 miles away there's a gay bar. I was so excited. My first night at the university, I went to that gay bar. And I found my first boyfriend, and a month or so later, I found my first husband of three years.

It was life-changing. It was, was as if I walked—when I walked in the door of the back door (they didn't have a front door; I had to go in the back), it was like these are my people. I feel at home. For the first time in my life, I felt free and at ease. So, I had a boyfriend through college, but I wasn't—I was active in the anti-war movement but not in the gay movement.

There was a gay group on campus. And I went to the first meeting, and they had lots of people there. The room was packed. But they had these bizarre procedures. Everybody had to agree on everything or wouldn't be passed. So, nothing got passed. The second meeting, half as many people showed up; third meeting, half as many people showed up because nothing was happening. And I stopped going after that, so I wasn't involved in gay activism at all. There were

times when I would hear anti-gay jokes told. I would speak up and say, “I’m a gay man, I don't appreciate you saying that” and people were very respectful but I wasn't active.

I knew since I was real young that I wanted to live in at least two disparate parts of America or the world to learn about life, so I made a list of twelve to fifteen criteria: warm winter near a mountain, or an ocean, bicycle friendly, et cetera, et cetera, it had to have three gay bars. I didn't even know Savannah existed, but it came to the top of the list. Of course, when I got here, there was only one gay bar, not three gay bars. But I chose Savannah based on those criteria and wanting to live a very different lifestyle than in in Milwaukee. So, I enjoyed it a whole lot at first: the architecture the neighborhoods, etc.

I wasn't involved in much of anything until Lawrence Marley showed up. I moved here in 1980; he got here maybe five years later, give or take. And he was the son of a bitch. We became best friends, but it took the son of a bitch to change things in Savannah, to get the police to stop mistreating us, etc., politicians to stepping on us, etc., the church to condemn us, etc. Lawrence Marley—some people say he was here at the beginning of the founding of the gay community in Savannah, and that's not true. Lawrence Marley was the founder of the gay community. If he hadn't been here, we would have been like a ghost of Charleston or Columbus. It would have happened eventually, but he's the one that made it happen.

He was the son of a bitch; he wasn't afraid to stand up to anybody. He did ask for my support. He asked for me to stand by his side when he was doing interviews and meeting with people. And I’m a shy person; I’m not comfortable even doing this. But I knew how important it was from all of the stories I had heard, so I reluctantly stood by the side of Lawrence Marley. He's the one that changed Savannah. And we did a lot of interesting things together.

I’m going to tell you about the first time we met with the police. I’d always—I lived right off of Bull Street for a number of years. And I’d always heard about prostitutes or something on Bull Street, and people being approached. I never ever, ever saw that in the years I’ve lived here. But we got reports from, I talked to four different gay men. I didn't know any of them, and they all told the same story. This is when sodomy was illegal in Georgia. They'd be sitting on a park bench on Bull Street. A very, very, very good-looking man in a tight t-shirt with muscles would sit next to them, and he would engage them in conversation. He would engage them in gay conversation. And at some point, the good-looking fellow would say, “Do you want to come to my house?” Some of the men would say yes; he was a beautiful guy. And the undercover police officer would at some point say, “Well, what are you going to do to me when we get to my house?” and some of the men would say “Well, I’ll give you a blow job.” And they'd be arrested immediately, put in handcuffs and taken to a room in the police station downtown. The headquarters—not a cell, just a room an isolated room.

And they all told the same story: that they were kept there for hours. Police officer would come in and say, “Look there's the little faggot” and leave. Ten minutes later, a couple officers would come and accidently step on their feet or push them. While later, another officer would come in, say “look at the fag,” and accidentally spit on them. And this would go on and on. So, again I talked to four men. I don't know who Lawrence talked to. But we decided we needed to do something, so we requested a meeting with the police. They agreed. Before the meeting, I said, “Now Lawrence,”—I actually said this—I said, “We need to come across as normal people. We need to wear coat and tie. Be respectful. Be diplomatic. Have everything thought out beforehand.” And Lawrence said, “Okay, Mark.” We planned out exactly what Lawrence was going to say.

We went to the police station, a big room in the bottom of the police station. There were two officers across from us. They tried to do, later, this stupid good cop, bad cop thing. It was embarrassing how childish they were. And me and Lawrence on the other side of the table. We introduced ourselves; they introduced themselves. And then Lawrence was supposed to say something like, “We're here of a matter of great concern to the gay community. This is what's happening, and we would like some resolution of this.” But that's not what came out of Lawrence’s mouth.

What came out of Lawrence’s mouth was, “We know what the fuck you goddamn assholes are doing, and if you shits don't stop this, we're going to take your fucking assholes to court.” And then he pounded his fist on the table as hard as he could. Everything on the table, including our arms, bounced up. He taught me a great deal; he taught me that sometimes diplomacy is important, but there are other times you have to be aggressive. A lesbian closeted police officer told us that the undercover officer was taken off the street immediately. If we had done it my way (diplomatically), they would have said “Oh, we love you gay people” and patted us on the back, and, you know, we would’ve walked out; nothing would have changed. So, Lawrence Marley, unfortunately, is dead. He deserves all the credit. He was willing to stand up to the police for the first time, to Club One when they tried to keep black people out, to politicians. He's the, he's the brilliant fellow in Savannah.

CJ: So, getting back to your beginnings in Savannah. You moved there because it seemed like one of the places on your list. When you came to Savannah, did you start off as a landscaper? How did you support yourself at the beginning?

MK: I made very good money in Milwaukee. I worked sixty hours a week. I was a hard worker, so I saved up a lot of money. When I moved here, I didn't work for three months; I just explored. And it was wonderful, but I got bored after three months. So, I applied at landscape and got hired immediately and worked for him for a number of years. Very good fella, David Reeves, I think highly of. And when I moved here in 1980, I decided I was going to stop lying and pretending

that I was straight. So, no more girlfriends, no more pretend girlfriends; if somebody asked what I was doing, I'd say I was going to the gay bar. And my boss was wonderful about that. The people at work were wonderful about that. Not the laborers, they weren't so wonderful about it. I had some problems there, but the office of people and David Reeves were wonderful.

And I was told when I moved here, you can survive being gay. This is by other gay people born and raised here. Just don't tell too many people about it. Just have your small group of friends, go to the gay bar on Saturday night; then on Sunday, be in church. And you'll be fine and dandy, and they were right. Very few gay people have been attacked, beaten up, chased, etc., harassed, because most gay people are just people. They live their lives. But I didn't remain silent because, again, Lawrence Marley asked me to stand with him. And I didn't have any problems at my home when I lived in the city of Savannah, but when I moved to unincorporated Chatham County just outside the city limits, problems began.

So, I'll get back to that police officer that I started out with. But first couple years, no problems. But I was on TV, the newspaper, the radio, had a rainbow bumper sticker. People in the neighborhood who liked me knew I was gay, and I'm sure that got around. Outside one day, and somebody drove by and yelled "faggot" or "queer." I don't remember which, kind of interchangeable back then. I ignored it. I thought if I show any emotion, it will just encourage them, so I'm going to pretend I didn't hear it. A couple of months later, it happened again. Again, I pretended I didn't hear it. A couple of months later, it happened again. The next year, the number of incidents doubled, but I kept on with my strategy. Year after that, they doubled again, but I kept on with my stupid strategy of pretending I didn't hear it—that it didn't affect me.

There was one fourteen-day period. Ten out of those fourteen days, going up my front door, I was yelled at, "queer, faggot." So, but that's freedom of speech. I only called the police a couple of times when something violent happened at my house, but some of my neighbors who liked me, when they saw a gang of young white males screaming "kill the faggot and kill the queer," would call the police. The police told me that one officer specifically said, "That's their legal right, they can do that, that's freedom of speech." And I had no problem with that, so I said, "So every time I see a police officer, I can yell 'you fucking pig' and they won't do anything to me?" And he paused and said, "That's right." We were off by ourselves, so I asked the neighbor to come over and ask the officer to repeat what he just told me, and, of course, he wouldn't. Some people consider gay people to be weak, but I consider our police department to be embarrassing and weak.

CJ: What year was that, that that was happening? Because you said that you moved in 1980, right?

MK: So, about ten years ago. I'm bad at chronology. I've got all sorts of files, but I'd have

to go through it. Yeah, the, the anti-gay stuff didn't happen until it moved to Shipyard Road, about 1990 maybe. And again, it began with verbal harassment. With the ten out of fourteen days, it was school kids waiting at a bus stop. Middle school kids. On a Monday, it was one girl yelling "queer." They yelled. Tuesday, she yelled "queer" several times and another student who joined. By Friday, everybody at that bus stop was yelling "queer." So, by then, I realized the police were totally useless; they were even encouraging this kind of thing. So, I went up to them, and I was told by an officer I could have been arrested for that. And I said, "Harassing the neighbor is not acceptable. If you continue to do this, I'm going to contact your school and contact your parents. Let them know what you're doing." I didn't say gay, homosexual, anything—just harassment.

Well, Monday, it repeated itself. One girl did it; by Friday, they were all yelling "queer and faggot." So again, I thought I've got to do something, so I waited for the bus across the street and told the bus driver what was happening. Didn't use the words gay or queer, anything; just that I was being harassed by these students. And the amazing thing is all of the kids on the bus immediately turned on the student who began it on those Mondays, and said, "she's the one, she's the one," and she actually began crying. I felt bad for her, but somebody had to do something. So, the bus driver gave me the name of the school and etc., and I talked to a female security officer there and that stopped it. But I had to do that. Again, the police said that what I did, I could have been arrested for, and that they were simply exercising their First Amendment rights to free speech.

So, after the verbal stuff for a number of years, my mailbox was smashed in. And I thought, well, I've heard that happening to other people, but I looked in the neighborhood. Nobody else's mailbox was smashed in. I pounded it out. A couple weeks later, it was smashed in again. Looked in the neighborhood: nobody else's. Pounded it out. Smashed in again. Put up a new mailbox. Well, now it's an old mailbox and it's sort of on a spring, so when it's hit, it just bounces. I need to pause.

CJ: Okay, we'll pause it.

[Interview paused]

MK: I know it's very hard to share some of these memories, and I really appreciate your willingness to do so. It's, it's tough.

MK: Well, I appreciate that, and I'll try to get through it, because you're right; I don't usually think about it, and I'm thinking about it all at once.

So, paint was thrown on my trunk—a truck. Pink paint. Broken glass beneath my truck tires, so in the morning when I get in my truck and drive, I'd have flat tires. A rock thrown through my window. I wasn't there when the rock was thrown through my window. The thing that pissed me off most about that is my old, old dog Rags was home, and she walked through the broken glass, and that really pissed me off. But the police said—well—I don't think they even took a report.

There's only one time that a police officer did anything, other than encourage these jackasses. I forget why he was there; I didn't call him. One of the neighbors called him, and I thought since he was there, I'm going to ask him about this thing. Because one of my neighbors said, "What's that little hole in your windshield of your truck?" I thought in the middle of the night, maybe a rock hit it or something because it was almost all the way through. And the neighbors said that wasn't a rock—that's from a gun. I said, "That can't be from a gun. If a gun hit my window, smashed the whole thing, shattered the whole thing." He said, "no, it's not a high-powered rifle, but maybe BB gun, pellet gun." So, when the officer was there, I said "Could you take a look at that and tell me what you think that is?" And he said, "Yes, that's a from a gun," and I thought, hell, if they had hit me in my eyeball or something. So, for a while after that (my bed is right next to the window in the front), I laid awake at night, thinking there's a gun—shotgun come through the window.

But anyway, I told the cop what had been happening. I said, "Would you please go and talk to some of these kids?" And I told him, I suggested what he say: no gay, no queer, no lesbian, nothing like that. I said, "Would you go and tell them that there have been reports that there have been neighbors that are being harassed, and that harassment is totally unacceptable? And then if it continues, he'll come back and knock on their door." And he did that, and the harassment stopped completely for about three months. But then it continued again. It showed me that if the police wanted to, they had the power to help a citizen, to serve and protect, but they were willing to do the opposite. They were willing to encourage this stuff against me.

CJ: Okay, so this was around 1990, and you did what—what happened after that in terms of your activism, or you know, other ways in which you were fighting back?

MK: Yeah, this was happening at my house, but I was also being very active, which is why it was happening at my house. If I had not been on TV and radio, I would have lived a quiet life. Like, I have gay neighbors who've never been attacked.

CJ: Well, so, that's really an interesting aspect of all of this because some of your activities led to some of the events that you've been talking about. I, I'd love for you know, for, for folks to understand. To get back, you mentioned Lawrence Marley. When you came to Savannah, you said that you found that there was a gay bar there that you could get involved in. Is that how you established many of your first social contacts? In, the, in the gay bar there?

MK: Probably all of them. I met Richard Hall. He was born and raised in Savannah. He taught me a lot about the separation of black and white and how gays were treated in Savannah. So yeah, he was a good friend, and through him I met other people. All white. I had a few peripheral black acquaintances, but it was a white gay world. And again, it didn't—for some reason, I guess because Milwaukee was also very segregated, it just didn't occur to me that it was an issue in the gay community.

CJ: So, what were some of the first things that you got involved in, in the community as an activist? You said that, that these two these two friends of yours were involved. Were there any organizations that you were involved in?

MK: There was nothing. The only thing that existed in the entire state of Georgia was the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus. And it was totally non-political, non-confrontational. There were good people, but I didn't do anything until Lawrence Marley convinced me that we had the power to do something. And I can't tell you exactly what year, 1985 maybe, roughly. And when we saw things that we considered not right, we decided to do something about them, like meeting with the police who are arresting gay men on Bull Street for talking about sex. That was the first time we interacted with the police. The first of many times.

CJ: Was it just the two of you or others?

MK: No one else was willing to join us. I mean, there were some good peoples—some people who made promises, and I'm not faulting them because, again, they didn't want to get attacked. I don't blame them. I've been involved in politics or activism since age fourteen when my brother was going to be, eighteen-year-old brother, was going to be thrown into Vietnam. And if you know my brother, he's a good fellow. He's a straight fellow. But I thought, what is this country coming to if they're going to send people I came off to, to war with a gun? So, at age fourteen, I got involved with some politician who was anti-war. I don't even remember who he was. And then in high school, in junior, when I was a junior in high school, I was the president of the school environmental group, and we had a three-thousand-person school, so we had a big group. And I did some very activist things then, and I was told, "Don't do them, you're going to get kicked out of school." Maybe it's because I'm short, maybe it's because I've always been kind of in the background observing things. That I've, I've noticed these things and just decided to get involved. I realized I had the power to do some stuff.

CJ: So, I think quite a few people have gotten a lot of inspiration from early experiences as activists, whether it was being a gay activist or in in the anti-war movement, especially in the early 70s. That seemed to, you know, to lead into other activities because some of the same people were involved in similar activities.

MK: Yeah.

CJ: So, when you came to Savannah, and you got involved with a small group of people doing some very grassroots stuff. I know that there was an organization that was formed fairly early on in the seventies or—you moved in eighties, so in the early eighties—was there an organization that was founded by you guys?

MK: Definitely. Lawrence Marley was the inspiration for all of that. By then, I was his best friend and sort of right-hand man. And he decided we needed an organization, something to back us up, so it wasn't just Lawrence and Mark; it was an organization. So, I forget what we call it in the beginning. It wasn't First City Network, but I remember very clearly the first meeting. I became known as the flyer man because that's when I began passing out flyers at the bar and anybody I saw who I knew, letting them know about this new gay organization. So, we had an old empty building on Waters Avenue, and it was standing room only. People were lined up against the walls. It was like wow, kind of like at the University of Milwaukee in Wisconsin with that first gay meeting. But unfortunately, I didn't learn anything from the Madison meetings because we didn't have an organization. We weren't expecting 100 people or however many to show up. We weren't prepared to take to the next step.

So, the second meeting, fewer people came. The third meeting, fewer people came. And then we finally got our act together and realized we needed structure, and meeting times, and places. And that's when First City Network took off. But in the beginning, it was mostly a small group of people. Unfortunately, mostly white males. A few women joined, like Pat Gallagher (who's home I'm at right now), Patty Latham, Wilson Huff. Great women. But in the beginning, the leadership was white male, and again I didn't see anything wrong with that; I was so blind.

CJ: So, who, who was the person who got everything organized? And turned it into a real organization?

MK: Well, Lawrence Marley was the charismatic asshole, if that makes any sense. He was the kind of a pleasant-looking fellow, well-spoken. I was more the organizer, making sure that all the Ps and Qs were taken care of. Moreso the front man. I would stand next to Lawrence, and I would answer questions if need be. But it was all Lawrence. It was nothing but Lawrence. He was charismatic, but like some charismatic people, he pissed some people off, so there were controversies. But we did for a form First City Network. We had, I don't know if they were called board meetings, but at different people's houses, and they were often antagonistic because Lawrence was antagonistic. So, it was not uncommon for people to end up crying at the meetings and yelling at the meetings because Lawrence wanted it this way and they thought, "No we can't

do that. That's too radical." But he usually got his way, and again he's the one that made everything happen.

CJ: Would—did this become a formal nonprofit organization?

MK: It did. 501 (c)(3) or whatever, so we were able to get tax deductible donations. We were not allowed to be involved in politics. So, we had board meetings; we had a board meeting at Lawrence's house downtown. The time—don't ask me what year, you can check this out. But for the first time ever a politician, a fellow who wanted to run for office, came to our—one of our meetings. And we were like, "oh wow." But we knew we couldn't talk to him at the meeting, so we adjourned the meeting, and he stayed. Martin Shackle; he was the first person who wanted to be a politician who came to the gay community actively, openly, seeking our support. And we worked real hard for him, Lawrence especially.

CJ: Was this in the mid-eighties, or would you say 1990s? More like the eighties.

MK: Late eighties.

CJ: Okay.

MK: But, again like I'm bad at chronology—

CJ: Yeah, exact dates are not important. I'm just kind of interested to see the evolution of the organization over time. So, you know, ballpark figures are fine.

MK: Well Martin Shackle, I think he ran a second time, and we campaigned for him second time. I don't remember. But he was ultimately ousted from office for, (he was a straight fellow) for sexual improprieties, which I thought was sort of funny. But anyway, but after that, I don't know if the word got out, but a number of people (politicians, people who wanted to be politicians) came to Lawrence, especially me a little bit, seeking our active support. But Martin Shackle was the first.

CJ: So, does that organization still exist?

MK: It has gone up and down, and up and down, over the years. It depends on who's in charge; sometimes the person in charge is very passive, doesn't want any controversy, then the membership tends to go down. But, yeah, I think it exists in a different form today; it's, it's folded in with the Gay Community Center. So, but, it's, it still exists. So, twenty-five, how many? thirty, thirty-some years. Organization, it's the oldest gay and lesbian organization in the state of Georgia.

CJ: So, out of that, I'm sure other organizations grew. What other organizations were you involved in personally?

MK: Well, let me go over two bad ones. I forget the fella's name—started the Savannah Gay Business Association or Business Guild or whatever. And I knew him a little bit, and I was real hesitant. He wanted membership money, and I believed, to me, in the purpose of the group. But I wasn't quite sure about him. But after a number of months, I reluctantly gave him money for membership. And not long after that, he stole all the money, including thousands of dollars from, from his boss. So that organization went down fairly quickly.

And there's another whole story. It's an AIDS story. But First City Network tried to deal with AIDS when it hit Savannah, but we realized early on it was going to be like a tsunami (like the Coronavirus) and that we had to set up a separate organization, so we set up AIDS Coastal Empire (ACE Foundation). The gay community did. But I went to everybody that I thought would be good on the board: doctors, lawyers, people who run other non-profits, business people. None of them, none of them would join. We ended up with a hairdresser, a junk shop guy, me, and Lawrence. But we realized, this is what we had; we had to do something.

Well, a fellow appeared on the scene: Mike Hawk. And there are very few people that I hate and will always hate. Mike Hawk showed up, moved here from North Carolina. He said that when he was in North Carolina, he was on the statewide AIDS commission from the inception, and not only was he on the statewide AIDS commission in North Carolina, he did all these wonderful things. And he listed them. He told them, he told everybody about them. When he lived in Charlotte, he said he was the president of the Charlotte Gay and Lesbian Organization. Not only was he the president, he doubled the membership, doubled the budget, doubled everything. And "oh wow." And when he lived in Nashville, he said the same thing: he was the president of their Gay and Lesbian Organization, doubled the membership, all of this other stuff. And he told detailed stories, and everybody was like, "wow."

I nominated him to be the head of our group. It turned out everything he said was a lie. Everything he said was a lie. Lawrence and I recognized it after a number of months because nothing was being done to help people with AIDS. He was throwing dinner parties. He was an extremely obese fellow. He threw lavish dinner parties with our money. I was the fundraiser, that's where I got to know Mills B. Lane, who was a wonderful fellow.

CJ: So, so did you have to remove him from that position?

MK: Well, here's the interesting part of the story.

CJ: Because I, I'm a little concerned about talking about somebody who is still living in that manner.

MK: He can sue me. Let me tell you the rest of the story. Lawrence called North Carolina, he talked to the statewide AIDS commission. He talked to the president of the Charlotte group. He talked to the president of the Asheville group. What he told me floored me: that everything was a lie. And I didn't even quite believe Lawrence, so I called those three people up in North Carolina. The statewide AIDS group had never heard of him. I described him, because he's extremely big, never saw anybody like that, maybe as a volunteer someplace. But same thing with the Charlotte group: never seen him, never heard of him. The Asheville group, he was sort of telling the troop—truth. He had been the president of their Gay Lesbian Group. The current president said he just about bankrupted the organization, he just about destroyed the organization. So, if you need backup on that, you can contact those people from the eighties.

Well, Lawrence told the board that. I backed Lawrence up. They didn't believe Lawrence because they hated Lawrence; he was an asshole. And because I was his best friend, they didn't believe me either. So, finally after a number of months of nothing happening, the money being disappearing, Lawrence resigned. I told Mills Lane, who had given us thousands of dollars, I can't collect any more money for them. It's just, something is really wrong with this organization. And I finally resigned too. I don't know what happened; I know it folded shortly thereafter. But it taught me that sometimes even with eight or nine people in a room, you'd think you'd have all the facts and be honest with them, and they still wouldn't believe you. So that organization folded.

CJ: So, are there any other organizations that took its place in time to become effective community organizations for HIV work?

MK: An existing group, and here's one of the saints in Savannah, heterosexual saint, Michael Elliott. He was the head of Union Mission. He didn't hesitate. I mean, people with AIDS, you'd look at some of them and it's like there was skin and bones, people didn't want to touch them; they didn't want to go in the same room with them. And here's Michael saying, “I will do whatever you need.” And he set up, well, Union Mission set up Phoenix House with the gay community support. I raised a lot of money for them. We put in the garden. We furnished the place. But if it weren't for Michael Elliott, that wouldn't have happened.

Doctors were turning their backs. There were only two doctors in Savannah for a number of years who would even look at a person with AIDS, would touch a person with AIDS. Half the people in the gay community didn't want anything to do with AIDS. You know, they thought if they talked about it, they would get it. Churches were horrible; the politicians in general were horrible. Michael Elliott was a saint, and he's alive today. And he's, he just deserves a lot of

credit. But those were the only things that happened. The foundation failure and Union Mission. And they still have Phoenix House today. I'm not involved in it, but they, it still exists.

CJ: So, you have been involved in a number of organizations. And what would you say are some of your most, what are some of the achievements of these organizations that you're most proud of being involved with?

MK: Okey-dokey. Another saint. A lesbian. Carol Riels moved here from one of the few liberal cities in Iowa. I forget which one. And she either started or was involved in gay pride up there, getting it going. And she came to the First City Network board meeting. I was a board member at the time. I've been a board member a number of times, the head of it a couple of times. And she laid out her plans for gay pride and that's what it was called in Savannah. And I was like, "Yeah, it's about time."

But I disagreed with her very openly about a number of things. She said plan for two thousand people; I said let's plan for a thousand. She said plan for eighty vendors; I said let's plan for twenty vendors. She said let's make it an eight-hour event; I said let's make it a four-hour event. Because I thought, this isn't gonna, you know—the first time ever.

I was wrong about everything. She was right about everything. That first pride, I was driving there, and it began to pour down raining. And I thought, I don't know, gosh. I got to the Roundhouse, the old railroad Roundhouse. It was packed with people. The rain didn't matter. It was time, and Carol Riels did that. Even though I was very hesitant at first. And I thought, "This is a great day in Savannah." Unfortunately, she left Savannah. I didn't know her that well, but I said, "Please stay," and she said she was not treated well by the lesbian community because she was an asshole like Lawrence Marley was. And it took her to make things happen, but she didn't feel welcomed by the lesbian community and she—I forget where she went, maybe back to Iowa. But gay pride continued on, but she was the one who made it happen.

CJ: That's awesome. Well, and you know, you mentioned a few other things that you had been involved in, and it sounds like you, you and these individuals that you've mentioned have really made a difference. Any other things that you can point to that have made you, that have encouraged you and inspired you, about the work that you've done?

MK: Well, I want to talk about an incident that happened to me again. We used to hear about people, gay men—never a lesbian. I've never heard of the lesbian being attacked. But we'd hear about the men being attacked leaving gay bars. And I always thought, well maybe they're drunk, maybe they said something inappropriate, maybe they made a sexual advance. And I was kind of, you know, poo pooted, maybe it was the gay person's fault. And I was passing out flyers at Club One, the big new three-story gay bar for gay volleyball. We had gay volleyball in Daffin

Park every Sunday in good weather. It's one of the things I wanted to do, not just activism, but ways for people to get to know each other, other than just bars.

So, I finished passing out the flyers, and it was—I don't know what time, one, two in the morning. And this is about twenty years ago. Not as many people downtown. There were a group of young white males blocking the sidewalk fifty-sixty feet down, and I didn't think they were blocking it intentionally; I thought they were just hanging out. And I learned not to look at people like that, you kind of look down. You don't want to make eye contact. The last thing I remember was walking to the very edge of the sidewalk, actually on the curb, to get around them, and the next thing I knew, I was picking myself up off the sidewalk. I didn't know quite what had happened right away, but I knew something happened. So, I was on the sidewalk, and I lifted myself up on me my elbows, and I saw a police car about a block away. And I thought, "Thank God, I'm safe, there's somebody here who will help me." Even though I heard all these bad things about the police, and this hadn't happened at my house yet. But the officers were saying she wasn't going to help me. I thought, "there's somebody who can help me, somebody. I'm safe." I had this burst of energy. You hear these hundred-pound women lifting a car up that's rolled onto their kid—it was that same sort of thing I had. This burst of energy. And I got up, and I flagged them down. I told him what happened. I was standing on the sidewalk with my hands behind my back, clasped behind my back. I didn't know exactly what happened other than that I left the gay bar, and I was attacked, and I ended up on the sidewalk.

He said, "You only have a little bruise. Go home and forget about it." I didn't know exactly what had happened, but I had pain coursing through my body every ten seconds or so; it was mind numbing pain. I said, "I want a police report." I said, "I have a clear picture of the guy who hit me. I had two still pictures in my head, no movement, no sound. The first was the guy coming at me with his fist. I saw his hair color, his eye color, his skin color, what he was wearing on the shirt, that—the hatred in his face with his fist coming at me, so I saw the guy who was doing it. The other still picture and, I don't know when I took this one, was of them running away. I saw the direction they were running in. I could count number of them. I couldn't see their faces, but that they were all white. I could see some of the clothing. I had that. I told the officers that. He laughed. He said, "what do you expect me to do? Go after them?" I said, "I expect you to do something." Again, he said "just go home and forget about it," so I said, "I want you to write a police report."

He wasn't going to write, write a police report. So, standing there with my hands clasped behind my back, he wasn't going to write police report, I asked him for his name or badge number. He wouldn't give it to me. One of my contact lenses had been pushed up underneath my eyeball—eyelid, so I couldn't see quite. So, I saw something on his, or something. It was his name, so I leaned forward with my hands behind my back, and he pushed me into a brick wall. I mean not a gentle wall. He pushed me into a brick wall. And I thought, "oh man, I'm in trouble. This person

I thought would, would be here to help me, to do something." I didn't know what to do, but I would assume a police officer would know what to do if a citizen was attacked. Well, I kept insisting, so he did write a police report. He gave me the card, and he said, again "You just have a bruise. Go home."

I walked half a block to my truck. I got my truck, but I couldn't stop shaking and the pain would course through my head through my whole body, but especially my head, where I couldn't even think. But I began driving home. I said, "Well, he said I just have a bruise." But I was right by the police headquarters, and I said, "There's something wrong like this, this is, this isn't right." I went into the police station. There was one officer behind the counter. I told him what happened. He said, "Well, what do you expect me to do about it?" And then he went to the back room to put on gloves because I was bleeding on his counter. I was bleeding from the back of my head where I had hit the sidewalk. I was punched twice. It didn't bruise up 'till later on both sides of my head. I fell back, back my head hit the concrete sidewalk, and that knocked me unconscious. And my elbows were bleeding. But he said, "What do you expect me to do about it?" And he walked off.

I said, "I want to talk to a supervisor," and he did call the supervisor. He was there within a few minutes. The supervisor did exactly what I expected any police officer to do: he looked me over, called the paramedics, and took me into the bathroom. Cleaned me up. He wasn't friendly, he didn't smile. He did what a police officer should have done. It took three fucking police officers to get to the one who did the right thing. When the paramedics showed up, he took off that. He did what he did. I was very happy with him.

The first thing I said to the paramedics when they looked me over is "am I going to die?" And they assured me that I wasn't going to die, that I should go to the emergency room. But by then I was so demoralized, I just said, "I'm going home." And they bandaged me up and gave me some stuff. Every night for the next month, when I laid my head on the pillow, I felt that pain going through my head.

Well, a couple weeks later, I went down to the police headquarters to get the police report. And it was like he was writing about something totally different, something that didn't happen. He said I was drunk for one thing, and I knew I wasn't drunk. But half the stuff in there that was just lies. I immediately went to the EMT headquarters out of the ways because they wrote up a report too. And I told the woman behind the desk why I was there, what happened, and what I wanted. And she said, "The same thing happened to my best friend a couple weeks ago. He was attacked. The police said, 'not our problem.'"

So, there's so many stories I've heard from straight people, from women, from men. It didn't just happen to me. I didn't aggravate them. They just decided they were going to have a fun Saturday

night. White straight guys and beat up the faggot. And they did it because they could get away with it; they knew they could get away with it because the police wouldn't do anything. So, that's it.

Oh, I got him fired, I think. I became more of an asshole, like Lawrence, over the years. I decided he can't get away with it. I didn't want him fired, but I told the uppers what happened, and they said, "Well, you reported to the Police Investigative Unit," which turns out to be just a joke. And it was months and months of me, you know, calling. "Is anything happening?" and I don't know if they even told me the truth. But finally, after months, he said that the officer had been fired—not because of what he did or didn't do for me, but because he lied on his application form. But I don't know if he actually had been fired or if they were just telling me that to get me to go away, because I know that their job (cop investigating another cop) cannot be a pleasant thing.

CJ: Well, it sounds like you have been involved in a lot of different personal, personal struggles, as well as community struggles. And you've done a lot of great work. I wanted to pause here and say, we're at about an hour of interview. Would you like to schedule another interview to talk about then and now, what you're involved in, what you're planning to be involved in. or would you like to kind of take care of that now in the next, you know, say the next fifteen minutes or so? Just continue as we discussed, to talk about, you know, how things have changed for the better. What are still some problems, and what, what would you like to be involved in?

MK: Let me talk just for a few more minutes, and I'm happy to come back for another interview later. But regarding the police. That just solidified that the police were not going to help gay people in general. And then with what happened at my house with the officers saying, "look we're not going to do anything to help you. Your house is known as a gay house." And she laughed. I decided then that I couldn't rely on the police; they're an embarrassment, and I think that they're still an embarrassment. They set up the police liaison with the gay community. She's an embarrassment. She's a lesbian, but she has done nothing but protect the police department and nothing for the gay people who have needed help.

So, I've decided the police are totally useless in Savannah and remain useless today. That's a horrible thing to have to say. I think that most cops are not anti-gay or if they are, they don't bring it to work. But it's a sizable number of Savannah's police are anti-gay and they will continue to do anti-gay things. And they will continue to get away with it because the good cops are not speaking up. They're not going to speak up against fellow officers, so the problem isn't going to be solved. And I've talked to the higher-ups in the police department. One of them told me exactly what to do. I did exactly what they told me, and the first officer that appeared said, "we don't listen to those assholes downtown. Don't bother us again with this stuff." So, I have zero confidence in the police.

There was a celebration, I don't know, I think it was the first year anniversary of the Gay Community Center on Bull Street, and they had a big white board where people could write comments. And I was surprised to see the number of anti-police comments on that white board, so again, it re-emphasized that it wasn't just me. It's not those gay men who've been beaten up that I've talked to, it's not the stories I've heard; this is a real issue in Savannah. And I think it still exists today because there isn't so much of a gay bar anymore or spreading out maybe, it is—it isn't quite as bad, but, that's the stuff that I want to say. Things have gotten better politically police-wise. No, they continue to hire too many military people. Politically things have gotten better.

CJ: Well, I thank you so much for sharing all your thoughts and, and your experiences with us. If you'd like to continue the discussion, I'd be happy to schedule another session with you, and we can go into some other issues that may not have been covered in the previous discussion.

MK: Well, Carla, I really appreciate your taking your time to do this, and you come across as a professional. You give me confidence. But yeah, there are things I've talked about—mostly bad things. But there are many, many good things that have happened in Savannah, and I haven't even touched on them: gay volleyball, the oyster roast. So many great things that have happened, so I would like the opportunity to balance out what I've said a little bit and go from there.

CJ: That would be great. I'd be very happy to hear about those things. So, thanks a lot, and I think for now, we can end our formal interview.

End of interview.